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Alternate Sides

On Mondays and Fridays we moved to the west side, on Tuesdays and Thursdays to the east. Alternate side of the street parking was a ritual that shaped most evenings. There was no way to predict how long we'd be out searching for a spot on any particular night. The variables were too random and complex. You had to be pulling up towards a spot at the exact moment when someone was pulling out. It had a kind of karmic balance. There were more cars in the neighborhood than there were spots. You had to always be on the lookout, always on guard. And you could easily be tricked. Each side of the street had a fire hydrant. It turned a lawful spot into a permanently illegal one. As you pulled up, it appeared that you had found a good spot-- you couldn't see the hydrant until you were alongside it. I knew the exact location of every fire hydrant within a 1/2-mile radius of our apartment. I could not be fooled again. I needed to protect myself from that feeling of being let down. That cycle of hope, achievement, and setback was just too discouraging and usually took me a while to shake off. But I didn't want to find a spot too quickly anyway. I don't think my Dad did either, though it somehow became a theme we developed over the years: "How quickly could we get a good spot?"

We owned a 1951 Dodge Coronet, purchased new, for cash the year I was born. I loved to hear my father tell the story of the day he picked it up. He was unsure of how to get into the vehicle at first. He said it was like burrowing into a crawlspace and landing your butt on a soft cushion with a steering wheel in front of

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you. Then, while driving home he forgot to exit the Henry Hudson Parkway at Dykman Street and continued across the bridge into Riverdale, where although he was only one exit away, felt like he was lost on the mainland of America.

The make and model of the car was a great irony. *Dodge*, is the Yiddish word for German, the people he had fought in the war. The people who murdered his parents and nearly everyone else he ever knew. The people he had killed in battle. For that reason, I always associated the car with the war. But I didn't know if he chose that brand as a statement of victory, or if he was planting some seeds of forgiveness in the transaction.

The front seat was a comfortable and bouncy couch, and one of my earliest memories is snuggling into its crease for a nap. I can clearly recall its smell-- a mixture of new car and Parliament cigarettes. In my memory we're pulling through a car wash and I'm dry and safe snuggled in that cocoon with my dad.

It was the first night of Chanukah and we decided to park the car before lighting the menorah. Mom promised to make *latkes*, the fried potato pancake that was the traditional food for the holiday. And we would have our annual *dreidel* gambling game. We would spin for pennies and somehow I always won.

We quietly walked to the car and started cruising for a spot. It wasn't unusual for us to drive around without talking. Like many Holocaust survivors, my dad had so much to not talk about. We had a comforting emotional connection that made just silently being together feel like exactly the right thing.

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We slipped through the labyrinth of the city streets on our mission when all at once there was a sudden bright glare that reflected off the rear view mirror. It must have been the headlights of a truck driving behind us but I couldn't tell for sure. In front of us, steam rose up through a manhole cover, emitting a putrid smell like some vaporized malignancy from the crevices of hell. For a moment we had no visibility at all. My father's eyes darted to the mirror and I saw the smile wrinkles at the corners of his eyes turn down. As I looked into the mirror, I thought I saw movement within the reflected glare.

The image that appeared was of my father as a younger, more innocent man at the university in Warsaw. Although a college education was unusual for a Jew in Poland, he was bright and from an affluent family. Like most Jews throughout the Diaspora, he found himself both a part of and apart from the society in which he lived.

When the Nazis attacked Poland, school was out forever. The university students were given uniforms, guns, and officer ranks. In the haste to mobilize the entire male eligible population, the Polish government assumed that all the students were Polish Catholics. My father was given a squadron of men and sent to the front to stop the invasion. Two weeks later, the Nazis overran all of western and central Poland. And the Soviets invaded from the East, quickly occupying that part of the country.

On the western front, the Nazis killed every Polish military man they captured. They killed every Jewish man, woman, and child they could find. Capturing a Jewish Polish officer would be a special opportunity for torture. On the eastern side, the

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Soviets forcibly deported tens of thousands of Jews to Siberia, and Soviet security forces murdered thousands of captured Polish army officers. The Polish underground resistance forces fought for survival for five years. Locked in combat with the Nazis on one side and the Soviets on the other, they witnessed the searing images that left them forever contaminated.

After the liberation of Lublin in 1944, the Soviet government sponsored the formation of a provisional government of Poland. A high-ranking communist promised that, as soon as his squadron finished killing off the rest of the Jews, my father would become the mayor of a city.

That night my father buried his officer's uniform along with his newly acquired medals and citations, and put on some ragged clothing he found on the street. He picked up his young wife and daughter and they smuggled themselves across the border into American-occupied territory. Without looking back, and hoping never to have to, he left behind the massive ravaging destruction that Europe served to the Jews for a thousand years. Exiled into survival.

Looking out from the rearview mirror, his eyes met mine looking in. We found a spot on the next block and then briskly walked home. I tried to conjure up the smell of the warm potato *latkes* that awaited us, but the blowing breeze only carried the cries and screaming of that nightmarish place behind me. I knew then that evil did exist in the world and always had. Without resistance and the will to survive, any species could soon make itself extinct.

Gathering around the menorah, we celebrated the military victory that the band of guerrilla fighters led by the Macabbees had achieved over the Greeks. We

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blessed the candles, our luminous symbol of resistance and rebirth. The candles are lit one by one. One candle is lit the first day, a second the next, until the eighth candle is lit on the eighth day. Each day provides the opportunity for improvement, for more light. We position the lights of Chanukah in the window so that they beam outward in the name of dialogue and peace...a symbol of our ceaseless effort to repair.

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